

HIGHER EDUCATION ONLINE



By GOVIND SINGH

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**Online education
gradually penetrates
India as students and
institutes learn more
about its benefits**

Many universities and colleges in the United States and elsewhere have been luring students with such advertisements offering coveted degrees as new technology has brought long-distance education online. With a computer and Internet access, students can pursue an academic course, without being present in classroom.

As a consequence, many students and professionals with varied profiles who want to further their careers are opting for online degrees. It's now possible to earn a degree from a university abroad while remaining at home.

The trend to acquire online degrees and diplomas began in the United States in the 1990s and European countries followed suit. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in New Delhi started admitting students for online courses five years ago, aiming to democratize higher studies and provide affordable quality education to students even in remote areas.

Mark Rosenberg, executive vice president and provost of Florida International University in Miami, says that it is not just the promise of impressive technology that is luring people to electronic-learning, but the need to keep abreast of the changes in business. Companies such as AT&T, Cisco Systems and Lucent Technologies offer their employees online courses at lower costs.

Rosenberg writes in his book, *E-Learning: Strategies for Delivering Knowledge in the Digital Age*: "Unlike education through correspondence, the student remains in constant touch with his teacher. He can seek guidance from the teacher. Lessons which are received through the Internet are not printed notes but

notes containing animation and graphic pictures. So the lessons cease to be dull and monotonous. In a way, it is more effective than conventional education. This holds true because in a class of 40-50 students, the teacher may err, but in a multimedia program, the teacher is answerable to thousands of students."

Unlike traditional students—who usually attend university in their twenties before entering a profession—the online student community is diverse in lifestyle, background, age and needs.

Online learning at times provides the only educational opportunity for people preoccupied with work, family or other obligations. Working professionals, the physically challenged, educators or military personnel who cannot manage time to attend an on-campus course benefit from online classes.

Online students save time, travel and lodging expenses, although the fee for an online credit hour is the same as for a credit hour on campus. Most online colleges and universities use proctors at centers within the country and abroad to monitor exams.

Through the Internet, text material can be sent anytime, anywhere according to convenience. The transfer of text and graphics is faster and more reliable than through the mail, making students part of a global community. As in a classroom, students in online courses are formed into groups where they can discuss the subject and share notes. Students also chat with teachers.

Anup Chawla, an associate professor with the Indian Institute of Technology in New Delhi, who has been associated with the University of Illinois' online education center, says, "Every institute does not have to be an expert on every subject. With multimedia and other technological tools, online courses for science and technology can now be made possible." Marmar Mukhopadhyay, adviser with Classteacher.com and director of the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration in New Delhi, says, "The monopoly of the classroom as a source of education has been broken. The students should have the freedom to choose their medium."

Online education is proving to be a boon for those who had taken

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up jobs without completing their education. The same holds true for housewives and teachers who want to keep themselves updated.

American universities are the global leaders in online courses. According to a CNN survey, 90 percent of state-funded institutes and 40 percent of private institutes in the United States are offering higher education online. Under the aegis of the American Association of Community Colleges, more than 550 institutes are offering online graduate and postgraduate courses. The Online University Consortium is also spearheading medical education in various universities. Greg Eisenbarth, executive director of the consortium, says, "Universities don't want to miss the market opportunity online education presents and adult learners at company cites increasingly need qualified online degree programs that are delivered by quality universities."

More importantly, the online degrees hold the same value as regular on-campus degrees. Reputed institutions such as the University of Massachusetts at Boston, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Denver in Colorado have entered the online degree market.

In India a handful of private institutes and universities have started offering online courses and degrees, plus coaching for medical and engineering examinations. Some corporate houses are encouraging their staff to take online professional courses. E-gurukool.com, Zeelearn.com, Classteacher.com, NetVarsity.com, Aptech Limited, Brainvisa.com and Evidyarthi.com are some of the institutes in India that offer personalized professional courses to corporate executives. NetVarsity.com, hosted by NIIT Online Learning Ltd., offers 300 online courses that encompass the needs of a beginner just starting to use a computer to a programmer to someone preparing for the Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer examination. Some popular NIIT courses online are on public speaking and making a dynamic presentation. According to Uday Singh, head of NIIT online courses, the university has mostly professional employees enrolling in online courses to enhance their skills to fit into the global work environment. "We are making our courses more interactive with learners. Our programs such as Online Open Forum and Expert Opinion recreate the experience of a classroom. When the broadband Internet connectivity improves within the country, we feel student enrollment will obviously go up in the next four to

five years," says Singh. Because of convenience and cost factors, more than 10,000 students from Nepal, Bhutan and Brazil are enrolled with NetVarsity. Besides courses on information technology, NetVarsity has an array of online courses on soft skill development and project management.

The Institute of Management Technology in Ghaziabad near New Delhi offers management courses online. It enrolls students in a two-year eMBA and a one-year diploma course. Anupam Kumar Gupta, program officer of the institute's e-learning courses,

says, "We are running the third session now with 700 students and the number is increasing day by day." The institute has a three-tier delivery system—its main office, two regional centers and 110 study centers located across the country. Students seek counseling from their nearest center. Each student gets a login ID and pass-

word after admission. The study material is available online, along with CDs and interactive course material. Students can also chat with the faculty. Assignments, case studies and examinations are done online. According to Gupta, the cost of a two-year eMBA course is Rs. 60,000 and a one-year diploma is Rs. 15,000.

Conventional universities in India are yet to take the online path. Says IGNOU Vice Chancellor H.P. Dikshit: "We've explored every technical possibility while preparing our self-learning material. The methodology we developed for e-learning is being extended to other e-learning courses of the university. In all, we have put on offer six online programs and intend to increase such offerings." Dikshit maintains that such initiatives can eradicate problems related to access, equity and quality of education in India and abroad and contribute meaningfully to the goals of national development. □

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